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Standing Where They Stood

By Richard A. Butler

This past summer, I traveled to Germany and took part in a youth work camp that focused on researching topics associated with the Holocaust, and more specifically, the concentration camp Mittlebau-Dora in Nordhausen, Germany. The main focus of the organization, *Youth for Dora* is to make sure that young people are still engaging, discovering, and communicating the history of the concentration camp. Every year, the organization puts together a two week international work camp, of which I was lucky enough to be chosen to attend in August. As an undergraduate in history, focusing on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, I have long awaited the chance to be in the places that I have become so invested in. Once the reality of the situation set in, I started to wonder what the experience was going to be like, a sense of trepidation became more prevalent as the departure date approached.

The Project

The focus of these work camps is to undertake a project that spreads awareness about what happened in this city during the Nazi era, a history that the city does not like to confront or accept as I have come to learn. This year's project was meant as a protest and challenge to the common narrative, that the people of Nordhausen were victims rather than perpetrators. There is a monument which depicts the city of Nordhausen as victims of the allied bombing of the city. As the organization intended to shift the focus of this narrative onto the forced labor victims of the camp, this monument that stands at the city center represented the focus of our protest. Initially, the project consisted of a temporary monument made of Plexiglas encircling the existing monument memorializing the forced laborers who forcefully inhabited the city during the Nazi era. What motivated the organization to do this project was that one-third of the people living in the Nordhausen area were forced laborers, but the majority of the city's residents choose to not acknowledge it. Many Nordhausen businesses profited from the labor extorted from prisoners of Dora, and though some of these companies have owned up to their history, others continue to deny or ignore it. Similarly, many people in Nordhausen who have ties to this era also choose to not acknowledge the past. So, with that in mind, our group was to construct a temporary monument in an effort to memorialize those victims of forced labor. The

construction of this memorial would be an adventure in itself, because there were twelve minds, with twelve opinions on what the project should end up being.



Figure 1: Nordhausen, Germany. Photo by author.

After two days of discussion and deliberation on what the monument should say and look like, the group decided on a hexagonal structure that would have the Nordhausen skyline drawn, on the lower portion of the Plexiglas panels, but instead of a traditional drawing of buildings, we decided to use various sizes of human figures to make up an abstract but recognizable skyline. The other element to using these figures to form the skyline was that one-third of them would be drawn in a different color to represent the forced laborers among the population, as they walked the streets just as a normal citizen would (albeit with strict laws limiting personal freedoms), but this piece of the city's history has largely been ignored. The plan was to place text and information regarding forced laborers on the top half of these panels in order to bring awareness to what had happened, and also to provoke thoughts on why this is largely ignored by the citizens of the city. Projects of any sort rarely go exactly to plan, however, and this was no exception. The group ran into a myriad of problems in every phase of the project, whether it be materials, creativity, equipment, etc., but perhaps most importantly, where we would be able to place it once completed. The organization found out a few days later that the city revoked privileges to place our project around the existing monument. After becoming aware of this fact, the course of the project changed. The group decided to make a six paneled Plexiglas wall that would be placed inside the town hall next to the existing monument, and this proved to be an easier construction.

Monday started a hectic week of finishing up the project that we were to present on Friday. The people in the work camp split up into

different groups based on their interests and abilities. There was construction, research, design, and artists; being that I am not artistically inclined and cannot read German, I chose the construction crew. Although it came with a level of frustration, our group pretty much had free reign after we designed and planned the construction aspect of the project, to do what ever we wanted. Johannes (a member of the organization and my roommate throughout the trip) and another were also in the construction crew; our designing and planning stage took about two hours on the first day. The project went smoothly and the presentation to the town went a lot better than expected. There was a larger turnout than anticipated with positive feedback from the locals. As a group, we were wondering how it would be received as it was a direct challenge to popular belief, but it was received well, nonetheless. After the presentation, the project remained for two weeks in the town hall so that local passers-by would have the opportunity to view it and hopefully learn something about the towns' history. After the two weeks in the town hall, the display moved to the visitor center at the Mittlebau-Dora concentration camp where it will remain indefinitely.



Figure 2: The Finished Project. Photos by author.



Figure 3: The Finished Project. Photos by author.

Travel Experience

I had traveled to Germany once before as a high school student, and even visited the Dachau concentration camp, so the trepidation alluded to earlier was not necessarily that I was nervous to travel somewhere important in a place where I do not speak the language, but it was in the sense of doing so with a feeling of isolation from familiar peers. Not knowing anyone else in the work camp, and discovering that I would be the only American participant, let alone one of only two non-German participants in the camp (as the other international participants canceled at the last minute) was a bit intimidating. I decided to make the trip anyway, however; it was also my first time traveling on my own, which made me rely on my own devices, and the aid of infinitely generous locals to get where I needed to be.

The sense of relief was a welcomed feeling after the stresses of traveling were mounting; the person to come to my rescue was named Johannes, someone who I became very close to over the course of the work camp. Johannes is a native of Nordhausen, who spoke fluent English, so being able to communicate in full sentences was very comforting because I was discovering how isolating the language barrier was (it would be a feeling throughout the trip). His calming and easy going demeanor made the stress of the day subside.

The first night was a blur, as it usually is after such a long day accompanied with countless introductions and trying to keep my bearings while conversations around me were all going on in German; needless to say it was a very restful night when my head hit the pillow for good. The participants of the work camps stayed at a local youth hostel for the duration of the work camp, and roomed with people we did not know. The morning set off what would be a very interesting day,

because we were to tour the Mittlebau-Dora concentration camp, the camp that the organization *Youth for Dora* was based.

Going into the work camp, I purposely did not research this concentration camp prior to arriving, because I wanted to be a blank canvas and learn from being there on such hallowed ground. The camp itself was mostly ruins, as allied attacks destroyed the majority of the city and the camp. Dora was not the most prolific or oldest of the camps, it was actually quite young compared to the others as it opened in 1944. Before that, it was a sub-camp to Buchenwald. What was so defining to this camp, aside from the horrors associated with concentration camps in general, was the intricate tunnel system. The tunnels, which extend miles into the hill that the camp rests into, were impressive both for their feat of engineering, and the unbeknownst brutality that these tunnels brought. These tunnels, which were massive, were built on the backs of slave labor (per the Nazi *motus operandi*), and were consistently eight degrees centigrade year round and moist. This deadly combination: cold, moist, inhalation of debris, and Nazi brutality was in essence a death sentence in itself. The water in the air, combined with the particles inhaled converged in the prisoners lungs, effectively creating cement in the lungs, gradually halting the ability to breathe. Construction of these tunnels cost many lives. All the while, the prisoners worked, slept, and lived in these tunnels day in and day out during construction of both the tunnels and the camp on the surface.



Figure 4: Mittlebau-Dora Tunnels. Photo by author.

To go to such lengths to construct such an intricate system was meant to keep hidden what the Nazi scientists were getting ready to construct, the V-1 and V-2 rockets. These rockets were at the forefront of weapons technology during this era, and were constructed in these tunnels; also notable about these tunnels/weapon factories was that the famous Dr. Werner Von Braun was the lead scientist at the site. The

tunnels and rocket, nevertheless, remained a stark reminder of what happened here, and what was always lurking as we toured the camp site. Compared to Dachau, Dora was more run down and rural, which was to be expected as Dachau is largely reconstructed, and Dora is mostly original construction. The most harrowing sections of Dora is the intact roll call square, firing squad wall with the adjoining camp prison, and of course the hallmark of all concentration camps, the crematorium/burning facility. The newness of this camp to me, in that I had no prior knowledge of it, somewhat dampened the emotional impact that such a site would normally have, as I was so caught up in learning about everything and soaking up as much information as I could.

After spending the first part of the work day in the camp, we went into the city and toured areas which had significance during the Nazi time period. Walking the streets where Adolf Hitler had step foot was unsettling, because there was a sense that such a monster walked the same street that I did, and saw the same buildings; the distance from which we study him now seemed to dissipate and the reality that he was also human was all too real. As I was wrestling with that feeling, we continued the tour until we ended up at the city square, where the monument stood in stark contrast to these feelings.

After the work week was concluded on Friday (the next morning), we went on a day excursion to the Buchenwald concentration camp, the vastly larger sister camp to Dora and better known. Buchenwald is an imposing complex simply in terms of its size, as it is the largest in the area. Being that I already knew some of the history of the camp, the impact this day had on me personally was vastly different from when I toured the Dora camp. Buchenwald consists of largely original construction with minimal restoration, which adds an eerie authenticity that I think Dachau lacks. The harrowing nature of Buchenwald hits you full force as you walk through the watch tower gates and into the massive roll call square where prisoners stood every day during their internment. Standing where they stood, seeing the watch tower that is so synonymous with Nazi concentration camps, with the iron gates that say in German “you get what you deserve,” and imagining what would be going through a prisoners mind, one realizes that there is no way to even scratch the surface of the harsh realities of the camp. Studying from afar, reading a book, and writing papers allows the student a shield from the reality to some extent, but standing there removes all mysticism and it becomes resoundingly real!



Figure 5: Buchenwald Main Watch Tower and Gate. Photo by author.



Figure 6: Camp gate with the inscription "Jedem Das Seine." Translation: "you get what you deserve." Photo by author.

As the tour progressed, this sense of reality, and the resounding brutality that occurred on the ground I walked on, brought forth profound emotions that I had not been accustomed to feeling. Walking through the site of the roll call square and the main barracks where mostly non-Jews were held, was like a calm before the storm in comparisons to what took place in the outskirts of this section of the camp. In the more forested area of this section is where they held the Jewish population and the

infirm, which by all accounts can only be described as hell on earth. The brutality was two-fold, the first being the obvious holocaust horrors, and the second being the neglect they suffered (which brought it to a whole new level). In the “infirm/ill” section of the camp, was a camp within the camp, where the sick were just left there to rot, suffer, and die amongst each other in unimaginably putrid conditions.

The tour then culminated in the viewing of the crematorium, which is where the experience truly became too heavy to handle. Walking in the building felt like trespassing onto hallowed grounds, because so much evil that had occurred at the hands of fellow humans culminated in this building. It was the body cart immediately at the entrance, it was the basement with the dead body chute, the hooks on the walls where corpses hung until moved to the elevator, then finally the ovens that are all too infamous and identifiable with the tragedy that occurred in these camps. The tour itself was an all-out assault on emotion, but it was in the crematorium where it finally became too much and I had to find a wall outside to go behind, away from the group, as the emotions I had been suppressing overcame my ability to contain and wept. The experience was so powerful, so moving it is hard to describe and give it justice in text; it truly is one that should be encountered first hand, because I believe it is a unique experience for each individual. After the main tour of the camp, groups broke off and had the choice to go directly to Weimar or go view the memorial at Buchenwald celebrating the liberation of the camp on the site where the mass graves were. I chose to delay going to Weimar and visit the memorial which was draped in Soviet propaganda, but still very impressive and powerful.



Figure 7: Buchenwald Crematorium. Photo by author.

Reflecting on this experience, the one thing that stands out to me personally is that I gained a new, and different perspective on a multitude of things, whether it be academic, personal, or connections formed with strangers. As far as academically, it is definitely one thing to sit at home or a library reading about something that you are passionate about, but that kind of education can only take you so far. This experience of being on the ground, “Standing Where They Stood” adds an invaluable dimension to my education that I hold very dear, because there is a certain legitimacy an experience such as this adds to the time spent studying the events that took place. Furthermore, being in a camp I had no prior knowledge of, and working on a project that brought to light an issue that I was not well versed in, was a great learning experience. Finally, the friendships I made over the duration of the camp is a testament to that the fact that as indifferent as humans may act towards each other, humanity is not lost, and there is still hope.

